

# Unkind Names at School

An episode and issues arising, 2006

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‘Anybody who was ever called unkind names at school,’ said an editorial comment in *The Daily Telegraph* on Saturday 8 April 2006, ‘must be gasping with astonishment this weekend.’

Having caught thus its readers’ attention, the editorial explained it was referring to the news in the previous day’s paper (Britten 2006) that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) had ‘thought fit to bring criminal charges against a 10-year-old who is said to have called an 11-year-old schoolmate a “Paki” and “Bin Laden” in the playground.’ The paper quoted with warm approval the district court judge who was hearing the case at Salford Youth Court in Greater Manchester:

‘I was repeatedly called fat at school,’ said the judge. ‘Does this amount to a criminal offence? ... Nobody is more against racist abuse than me, but these are boys in a playground, this is nonsense... There must be other ways of dealing with this apart from criminal prosecution. In the old days, the headmaster would have got them both and given them a good clouting.’ The judge had other home truths to tell, which ought to give the Greater Manchester Police and the CPS pause for thought. ‘This is how stupid the whole system is getting,’ he said. ‘There are major crimes out there and the police don’t bother to prosecute. If you get your car stolen, it doesn’t matter, but you get two kids falling out ... this is nonsense.’

‘Two kids falling out ... this is nonsense’. This was the recurring refrain in most other papers commenting on the same story. There had been a playground tiff, scrap, jibe, argument, taunt, minor disagreement, quarrel or squabble (all these terms were used) involving two individuals. It had not been serious, merely the typical behaviour of young children. ‘Up on a charge of being a typical child,’ said a headline in the *Sunday Times* (9 April). ‘It happens all the time’, declared editorial comment in the *Daily Mail* (8 April) and it then continued:

Schoolchildren squabble. There may be tears. They call each other utterly unacceptable names. Their teacher calls them over and tells them not to be so offensive and learn to respect each other. So children learn to become responsible adults. Not this time. Now a playground quarrel engages the full majesty of the law, with a police investigation, a file prepared for the Crown Prosecution Service, an appearance in court ...

The district judge, commented the *Mail*, was 'splendid'. Spokespersons for the NUT and the NASUWT, however, robustly denounced him. This brought upon them personal and sexist abuse from the conservative press. In the *Sunday Telegraph* (9 April), A.N.Wilson claimed the case was about a 10-year-old boy 'calling another little boy rude names'; and that 'it can't be long before the hags and thought-police of the teachers' unions try to outlaw the use of nicknames altogether.' (The 'nicknames' in the present case, it was reported in some papers, included not only Paki and Bin Laden but also Nigger, as in 'He is on the run, pull the trigger and shoot the nigger, five, four, three, two, one'.) An article in the *Mail* (Slack and Narrain, 2006) quoted an anonymous former colleague of the general secretary of the NASUWT to the effect that 'she can be too blinkered and inflexible. I'm not sure she knows when to settle and that gets people's backs up. I think she's difficult to get on with.' Editorial comment in the *Mail* on the same day referred to her 'politically correct world of inverted values'. 'If this kind of sanctimonious silliness exists at the top of the teachers' unions,' wondered Minette Marrin in the *Sunday Times*, 'what hope is there for education in this country?' The entire episode, she said, had 'a faint whiff of the Soviet show trials or the Salem witch-hunts about it, a kind of public hysteria. Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.' Similarly trenchant criticisms of the unions came from the British National Party (BNP), which contrasted the judge's 'common sense statements' with 'the real bully boys and girls, the hate-filled Marxists of the National Union of Teachers'. Simon Heffer in the *Telegraph*, under the heading 'Racists: we've got to catch them young', asserted that the statements by the unions reflected 'their crazed desire to stalinise our children rather than educate them' and commended 'the abundant common sense' of the judge in saying that 'what the boy required, at most, was a clip round the ear'. He concluded with ponderous sarcasm:

Since neither the CPS nor the police have anything better to do, perhaps I could suggest an extension of this policy, starting with abandoning the minimum age of criminality. It is obvious that all primary schools and, indeed, nurseries should be regularly inspected for signs of racist tots, with exemplary prosecutions where necessary. And don't forget maternity wards - you can't catch them too young, and heaven knows what harm is being done to our nation by bigoted babies.

Sarcasm and denial along these lines were also expressed, it is relevant to note, on the websites of the *Mail* and *Telegraph* in summer 2008 when a book on racism amongst young children was published (Lane 2008) and on the website of the *Guardian* when the book's authors defended it (Ouseley and Lane 2008).

In relation to the Salford case in 2006, the BNP blamed 'self-loathing white advocates of multiculturalism' and Carole Malone in the *Sunday Mirror* (9 April), under the headline 'Shame on the playtime police', blamed 'lentil-eating liberals who ... refuse to believe anyone is intrinsically evil'. Ann Widdecombe, under the heading 'Don't take playground tiffs into the courtroom' (*Daily Express*, 12 April), reflected that 'the country is well nigh paralysed by political correctness, fear of giving offence and the compensation culture.' She added: 'It is a pity the head could not apply the slipper, as the judge acknowledged.' Her conclusion was to do with malaise in the state of

Britain as a whole, not just about '10-year-olds being rude in the playground', and was a scattergun attack on a wide range of targets:

Truly the lunatics have taken over the asylum. Truly I understand why people emigrate. My only surprise is that there is anybody left here at all. The NHS is in a state of near collapse, education has become a joke, the law-abiding live behind bars as they fortify their houses, pension schemes have been robbed by the most irresponsible Chancellor I can remember, the countryside is full of useless devices which wave their arms around and produce scarcely enough energy to propel a toy train and 10-year-olds are prosecuted for being rude in the playground.

A Muslim dimension of the affair was indicated by the terms Bin Laden and Paki in the insults that were alleged to have been used, and in the *Daily Mail* (8 April 2006) by the inclusion of a quotation from the chair of the Muslim Council of Britain's education committee, who had said: 'We need to be sensible in relation to 10-year-old children. The issue of racism is, of course, very serious but we should educate them, not take them to court.' The *Mail* commented that 'to its credit, the Muslim Council of Britain sees this affair for what it is and says the case should never have come to court.' It contrasted this with 'the bovine, brainwashed, politically-correct mindset of the liberal establishment'. 'The only good news in this sorry story,' it was said in the *Sunday Times*, 'is that the Muslim Council of Britain has taken a wise and adult line, sensitive though Muslims are to racism. It has supported the judge in his comments.'

It is sobering to compare the news coverage outlined above with an account of what actually happened. It was the *Mail on Sunday* that took the trouble to find out and to publish the facts. An article by Andrew Chapman and Louisa Pritchard (9 April) explained the background. In a nutshell, the episode under consideration had *not* been a playground spat, tiff or squabble, but had involved persistent bullying and physical attacks over several months. It had *not* been a single child doing the bullying, but three. The police and the CPS had *not* taken the case to court on a whim, but had used restorative justice approaches to try to persuade the three alleged offenders to accept reprimands or warnings; they had been successful with two of them but not with the third, which was why the third had had to come to court.

The article was based on an interview with the mother of the boy who had been at the receiving end of the bullying. 'I was disgusted,' she said, 'by the judge's remarks, that seemed to belittle my son's ordeal even further.' She continued:

The judge is wrong. He may have been fat at school and he may have been called names. But my son can never change the colour of his skin and that's the difference here. I just wish the judge had seen the tears streaming down my son's face when he finally broke down and told me all about what had happened to him. How dare the judge match being called fat in the same vein as the racist abuse my son has had to suffer? I was angered by his comments. This has

not just been a one-off name-calling session, this has amounted to several months of systematic taunting and bullying which has left my child withdrawn and miserable. Some of the names he has been called would make your hair curl.

Her son, she continued, 'was in a terrible state – withdrawn, sulky and upset. It was very cruel and humiliating. He'd never encountered anything like this before. The school was magnificent throughout and tried to deal with what was happening through normal disciplinary channels.'

The *Mail on Sunday* article also quoted from a statement by the CPS:

We originally decided the case did not need to be brought before the courts, and an official reprimand by the police was offered to the three boys. In one case a reprimand was accepted and given, in another a final warning was given because he had already had a reprimand for another matter but the third boy, although he admitted some of the offence, would not accept the reprimand after his parents took legal advice.

In due course, before the case came back to court, the third accused did accept a warning and the case was dropped. The Chief Crown Prosecutor for Greater Manchester issued a statement that politely but assertively challenged the judge and indicated the latter accepted he had been mistaken:

[The judge] made remarks about the decision to prosecute which were highly critical of the CPS. He was not aware of the full history of the matter, in particular the prior disposal of the allegations against the other two boys. He has accepted that he may well have been less forthright in his comments if he had been aware.

The judge also apologised in writing to the chief constable of Greater Manchester Police, Michael Todd, for the criticisms of the police he had made in court (BBC News, 26 April 2006). These admissions by the judge of ignorance and hasty judgement on his own part received no reference in the conservative press. On the contrary, the withdrawal of the charges was reported as 'a victory for common sense' (Narain 2006, see also Bunyan 2006) implying it was the common sense of the CPS that had prevailed rather than, as was in fact the case, the common sense of the alleged culprit's parents, and whoever was advising them. The story was kept in cuttings files in its incomplete and uncorrected form, however, and surfaced again in summer 2008, with the additional false embellishment that the case had been dropped as a result of a direct order by the judge (Doughty 2008). In years to come it may acquire additional embellishments whenever it is trotted out in the media to illustrate concerns about so-called political correctness and the state of British society. It already has the features of an urban legend, one that will run and run.

For the conservative media, the episode was not *just* an episode. It was also, to use a metaphor developed by theorists specialising in conflict resolution and transformation (Lederach 2003), an epicentre – it drew attention, in their view, to

seismic tensions, shifts and crises beneath the surface of society. These were summarised as being to do with political correctness, but the real anxieties arguably went rather deeper, and were to do with irrevocable social, economic and political changes amounting to 'the unsettling of Britain' (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000: 23) such as globalisation, loss of Empire, devolution of decision-making power, moral and social pluralism, decline of national influence, post-war migration and closeness to the rest of Europe. Be that as it may, consideration of racist bullying and incidents in schools touch frequently on the wider social context within which schools operate. Respect is due in the current context to Greater Manchester that was 'magnificent throughout' and, more generally, the leaders of the teaching unions who risked the wrath of the conservative press by speaking out for their members against the judge in the case outlined above.

### **Concluding note**

The composer Nitin Sawhney enjoyed his schooldays by and large, and had the good fortune to meet some inspirational teachers. 'But I went through school,' he writes, 'with an uneasy suspicion that I was inferior'. He wondered why:

It may have been a product of the notion that the history of the non-white population of this world is embedded in slavery and colonisation, or perhaps the echoing resonance of the word Paki as it accompanied me through the hostile corridors of the science block. (Sawhney 2003: 34)

Sawhney beautifully crystallises in this sentence the twin concerns of this book. On the one hand, the book is concerned with challenging and – as it were – demolishing the hostile corridors of the science block, and all other such places where young people interact outside the supervision of adults and where a traumatic experience may be the echoing resonance of the word Paki, and many similar abusive, excluding, devastating words and actions. The book is also about school classrooms, and what is taught and learnt there about history and humanity, and about so-called race. Corridors and classrooms can reinforce each other, as did those which Sawhney encountered, to give out the message that certain human beings are inferior. Alternatively, corridors and classrooms can reinforce each other with the opposite message: all are equal and all belong, though all are different. All have key roles not only in demolishing hostile corridors and curricula but also in replacing them with alternatives, and keeping the alternatives in good repair, day by day.

### **Source**

This essay was first published as the opening chapter of *Racist Incidents and Bullying in Schools: how to prevent them and how to respond when they happen* by Berenice Miles and Robin Richardson, Trentham Books 2006. The content of the book was summarised as follows:

First (chapter 2), there is an account of racist bullying and incidents in schools as seen by those at the receiving end. The mother quoted in chapter 1 (above) described how racist behaviour by other children had caused her son to be 'in a terrible state –

withdrawn, sulky and upset'. It is essential that action and policies against racism in schools should be informed and inspired by the experiences, stories and perceptions of those who suffer most. It is relevant to note that, with the single exception in *The Mail on Sunday*, no newspapers tried to report the case from the point of view of the boy who had been targeted, hurt and harmed.

Chapter 3 deals with basic concepts. The judge in the Salford case, as also the journalists who supported him, showed substantial ignorance and insensitivity. Such ignorance is rare amongst members of the teaching profession. Teachers do, however, need to be able to respond robustly and confidently to the kinds of attitude and ignorance displayed by the judge and the right-wing commentators. In particular the chapter is concerned with definitions and with clarifying vocabulary.

The next two chapters are to do with dealing with incidents that occur. Chapter 4 discusses four broad approaches and characterizes these as dismissive, punitive, corrective and transformative. The dismissive approach is the one adopted by the judge in the Salford case – 'two kids falling out', with the implication that there was nothing much to worry about. The punitive approach was also advocated by the judge – 'In the old days, the headmaster would have got them both and given them a good clouting'. The corrective approach involves teaching facts and intellectual arguments. Punitive and corrective approaches have their uses, but what essentially is required, chapter 4 argues, is an approach that can appropriately be described as restorative or transformative.

Chapter 5 discusses practical and theoretical issues around the recording and reporting of incidents.

The rest of the book is about prevention. There are discussions of key ideas across the curriculum (chapter 6); teaching about emotive and controversial histories, for example around the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade (chapter 7); classroom activities about antiracism in popular culture, particularly football (chapter 8); the uses of drama and theatre in empowering children and young people to be active citizens in opposing racism, as distinct from mere bystanders (chapter 9); teaching about distortions and simplifications in the media of the kind that have been highlighted in this introductory overview of the book's content and concerns (chapter 10); and the continuing professional development of staff (chapter 11). The chapter on professional development, it is relevant to note here as a kind of foretaste, is about hearts as well as minds and about, in the words of a speaker at one of the national conferences that led indirectly to this book, 'love and care and concern and kindness'.